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History Of Saint Augustine's Chapel and Cemetery



Saint Augustine's Chapel and Cemetery in 1828
Taken from Saint Augustine's Rectory Archives

South Boston

History of Saint Augustine's Chapel and Cemetery

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The Irish poet, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, had a dream. He wished to write an epic poem about the sufferings and triumphs of the struggling Irish immigrants. His heart was drawn to the theme of these anonymous souls who contributed so much to our country, to our community, to our city and to our Church.

His work, however, was never completed. But the epic story and struggle of our immigrant forefathers and mothers of all nationalities has been preserved

for us in St. Augustine's Chapel and Cemetery. Gazing at the headstones, we see the great numbers who were taken from their families at early ages. Their life was hard. As the eye turns to the Chapel, we see concretized the fierce loyalty to the Faith which led them to erect this place of worship through sacrificial offerings. They were poor but generous. And standing back and looking at the Chapel and Cemetery in its entirety, we see the seeds which were planted here — seeds which from this original Chapel and six other foundations bore fruit in the growth and accomplishments of the Church in Boston.

In many ways, the greatest treasure the grounds contain is the mortal remains of Father Francis Anthony Matignon. Bishop Chevrus, the first Bishop of Boston, said of him: "Remember him always as the founder of this church" (i.e. the Catholic Church in Boston). But it was his example which challenges every generation: "... He dedicated his services not to the mighty, nor to the wise, but to the humblest creatures of sorrow and suffering."

Dating from 1818, the Cemetery and Chapel provide us today with a linkage to our past. It had an important and formative influence upon the Catholic community. It has lived through history. And it is because of this that it has been designated as an historic site by the U.S. Government and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Sites.

The Saint Augustine Chapel is the oldest surviving Catholic Church in Massachusetts and the Saint Augustine Cemetery is the first Catholic Burying Ground in Boston. Both cultural resources are strongly associated with the founding and growth of the Catholic Church in New England and neither have had alterations or additions which adversely affect their association with historical events, significant persons or architectural value.

The Chapel and the Cemetery each are the product of an extraordinary priest, the Rt. Reverend John Louis Ann Magdalen Lefebvre de Cheverus (1768 - 1836), the first Catholic Bishop of Massachusetts. Bishop Cheverus established the Saint Augustine Cemetery in 1818 for the interment of his beloved friend and faithful helpmate in the organization of the Catholic Church in New England, the inspirational Reverend Dr. Francis Anthony Matignon (1753 - 1818).

Less than a year later Bishop Cheverus built the Saint Augustine Chapel as a mortuary chapel to honor Father Matignon siting it so that the grave was just opposite of the Chapel door. When Bishop Benedict J. Fenwick, who succeeded Bishop Cheverus as the Second Bishop of Boston in 1825, enlarged the church in 1831, he moved the gravestone of Father Matignon to the episcopal side (right) of the present altar and indicated the location of his grave as sixteen feet in front of the altar.

The small brick Saint Augustine Chapel, dedicated on July 4, 1819, is a religious property which derives its primary significance from a regional historical importance in the development of the Catholic Church in New England. The Chapel is also distinctive architecturally as a representative building type and is the oldest surviving structure of the Gothic Revival style in Massachusetts, the first example being the Federal Street Church (Charles Bulfinch, 1809, demolished) in addition to being a very early example of the Gothic revival style in New England.

The Saint Augustine Cemetery's primary significance is derived from its association with Dr. Francis Anthony Matignon whom Bishop Cheverus considered the real founder of the Catholic Church in Boston. Both the Chapel and the Cemetery have an important place in the social history of Boston as this was the first time Boston Catholics, and Irish Catholics in particular, had a central place to hold funerals and bury their dead. Attracted by the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery as well as the land development and the presence of glassworks offering employment, many Boston Irish, and subsequent waves of Irish immigrants, began to settle in South Boston. The Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery retains this strong association with its location and these early inhabitants formed the nucleus of the strong Irish Catholic Community of the South Boston of today.

The four earliest Catholic churches in New England were all built under the devoted, energetic and optimistic Bishop Cheverus. The first was the Church of the Holy Cross on Franklin Street (Charles Bulfinch, 1803) now demolished. The second and now oldest existing Catholic Church in New England is Saint Patrick's (1808), a brick chapel with a bell fashioned by Paul Revere, in Damariscotta Mills, Maine. The fourth church, which still survives, was built just before Bishop Cheverus returned to France in 1823; it is Old Saint Mary's, also brick, in Claremont, New Hampshire. Two further early churches were erected under the auspices of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, Saint Mary's in Charlestown (1828), followed by the plain brick Saint Patrick's (1836) on Northampton Street in the South End, neither of which survive. The Saint Augustine Chapel (1819) is the second Catholic Church in Massachusetts to be built and the third in New England. It now is the oldest surviving Catholic Church in Massachusetts and the second oldest in New England.

The major period of significance for the Saint Augustine Chapel extends from 1819, the date it was built, until 1874, the year the Church of Saint Augustine was dedicated. These years span a period of major church building in South Boston to service the needs of the growing Irish immigrant population in that section of the city. The major period of significance for the Cemetery ranges from 1818, with the first burial of Father Matignon, to the 1880's, after which burials were sporadic.

A major milestone for the Chapel came when the swelling South Boston population necessitated another Parish church. The Saint Augustine Chapel was enlarged in 1831 and dedicated on October 16 of the same year. Consecrated by Bishop Fenwick in 1833, regular church services were held at the Chapel from 1833 to 1844. By 1840, however, it became clear that the number of Catholic residents in the area was still increasing and a still larger church was necessary. The Church of Saints Peter and Paul (Gridley J. F. Bryant) was dedicated on July 13, 1845 and the Saint Augustine Chapel was no longer needed for regular services. Three years later, on September 8, 1848, there was a severe conflagration at Saints Peter and Paul and repairs were hurriedly made to the Chapel to accommodate that congregation.

From 1848 until the re-dedication of the Saints Peter and Paul Church on November 24, 1853, regular services were once again held at the Chapel. Despite the 1848 repairs and renewed use, the Chapel was described as "rapidly going in decay" in 1851 (Simonds, p. 162). It was also during this period in 1850 that the city council passed an ordinance forbidding further burials in the Saint Augustine Cemetery. Due to the astute actions of John Bernard Fitzpatrick, the Third Bishop of Boston, this ordinance and further attempts of the legislature to deny burials were repulsed and any family still

holding title to a cemetery deed may request to be buried there.

From 1868 to 1871 Saint Augustine's Chapel was used one last time as a parish church. When Reverend Denis O'Callaghan received the assignment to form the new Saint Augustine Parish and build the new Church of Saint Augustine, he decided to repair the Saint Augustine Chapel, which was in "ruinous condition" (Sullivan, Archdiocese of Boston, p. 84) and gather the congregation for the new church. Regular church services were held at the Chapel from September 6, 1868 until July 2, 1871 when the first mass was offered in the basement of the new Church of Saint Augustine.

Following the dedication of the Church of Saint Augustine (Patrick Charles Keely) on August 30, 1874, a recurring pattern began in the history of the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery. As each major anniversary approached, an earnest effort was made to repair and restore the two resources. In 1892 the Saint Augustine's Cemetery Improvement Association, later called the Saint Augustine's Chapel and Cemetery Association, composed of descendants of those who lie buried there, was formed especially for the care and preservation of the grounds and monuments. The Association built the present stone wall, iron arched entrances and picket fence in time for the 75th Anniversary of the dedication of the Chapel and Cemetery on September 24, 1894 which was attended by Archbishop John Joseph Williams.

Again, in 1918, the Chapel was in poor condition: "spalled-edge slates ... bare roofing boards ... broken window panes" (Warren, The Boston Herald, August 11, 1918) and some repairs were made for the October 26, 1919 Centennial of the Chapel, presided over by Cardinal William O'Connell. Two thousand people attended the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Chapel on July 4, 1944, with Bishop

Richard J. Cushing as orator; also included were the South Boston War Service Flag Dedication and Memorial Exercises, the dedication of new headstones from the Veterans of the Civil War, and an elaborate parade.

This latter celebration was preceded by over 15 months of restoration work on the Chapel and the moving of over 170 gravestones that had become dislocated through the years. In 1975 the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery were designated a historic site by the Office of the Boston Bicentennial leading to a flurry of dead tree removal, the stabilization of at least 50 monuments and extensive internal and external repairs. A new effort was launched in 1984 and is continuing into 1989 to accomplish a major restoration/conservation of both the Chapel and the Cemetery.

Dr. Francis Anthony Matignon and Bishop John Lefebvre de Cheverus both have significant associations with the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery and as the Cathedral of the Holy Cross (1803) was demolished, these two resources comprise the only major surviving physical link with these two men. It was Father Matignon's sudden death from a lung ailment on September 19, 1818, that inspired Bishop Cheverus to create both the Saint Augustine Cemetery and Chapel. A former professor of theology at the College of Navarre and an exile of the French Revolution, Father Matignon arrived in Boston on August 20, 1792, to help minister to the approximately one hundred Catholics dwelling in a diocese which comprised the whole of New England from Baltimore to the Canadian border. Joined in 1796 by his former brilliant pupil at the Sorbonne and fellow French exile, the future Bishop Cheverus, the thirty-nine year old Father Matignon labored for twenty-six years in the Boston area, serving as Pastor of the Parish of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross from 1792 until his death in 1818. It was under the combined nurturing of Father Matignon and Bishop Cheverus that the Catholic Church took root

in New England in general and Boston in particular. Father Matignon gained esteem, admiration and affection from the burgeoning Catholic and non-Catholic population alike and the Columbian Centinel of September 23, 1818, noted that his funeral procession "was the most numerous that has been witnessed here for sometime, estimated at 1000 persons, besides 15 carriages."

When Father Matignon died at the age of sixty-five on the fortieth anniversary of his ordination, Bishop Cheverus was overwhelmed with grief saying "Father Matignon died as he lived, a saint ... I am left desolate and forlorn." (125th Anniversary Program, July 4, 1944). Frustrated that Father Matignon had to be buried in the Granary Cemetery in Boston, although in the vault of a prominent Catholic of that period, John Magner, who had directed in his will of 1816 that the Catholic Clergy of the Church of the Holy Cross could be so interred, Cheverus resolved to create the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery. Receiving permission from the Board of Health of the Town of Boston in November 1818, Bishop Cheverus established Boston's first Catholic burying ground.

John Lefebvre de Cheverus, at the sincere request of the devoted but aging Father Matignon, was named the first Bishop of Boston on April 8, 1808 by Pope Pius VII. Due to the turbulent state of Europe at that time, the official notifications did not arrive in Boston until two years later and on November 1, 1810, he was consecrated Bishop of Boston. A learned man, Bishop Cheverus attended the Boston Athenaeum's Anthology Club and contributed much of his personal library to the Athenaeum. Besides the Saint Augustine Cemetery and Chapel, two visible memories of Bishop Cheverus remain in Boston. An 1823 Gilbert Stuart painting of "Bishop Jean-Louis Lefebvre de Cheverus" commissioned by the Protestant Mrs. John Gore, now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston,

was painted just before Bishop Cheverus went back to France. On the exterior wall of the Oratory of Saint Thomas More, 49 Franklin Street, there is an incised plaque, erected by a group of "Protestant Businessmen" in 1950 which honors Bishop Cheverus' role in the establishment of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, adding: "He Stood by the Bedside of Catholic and Protestant Alike." Bishop Cheverus died the Cardinal Archbishop of Bordeaux in 1836.

The third person important in the creation of the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery was Reverend Philip Lariscy, an Irish Augustinian priest, who came from the Canadian provinces. Given to fiery but compelling sermons, he was described as "a somewhat rough but earnest worker (Gurney, "A Short History of Saint Augustine's Cemetery, p. 4) and raised the \$680 necessary for the initial parcels of land for the Cemetery, principally from over 200 parishioners of the Church of the Holy Cross. A short time later he raised another \$1700 from 77 subscribers to build the Chapel. In his gratitude to Father Lariscy, Bishop Cheverus named the Chapel and Cemetery in honor of Saint Augustine, the patron saint of Father Lariscy's order.

The social history of the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery begins with some of the most prominent names in Federal Boston. Preceding the annexation of Dorchester Neck to Boston in 1804, several Mount Vernon Proprietors, including Harrison Gray Otis, bought up land in what is now called South Boston. In the course of assembling sufficient land for the Saint Augustine Cemetery, Bishop Cheverus in 1819 and 1822 bought two parcels from Jonathan Mason, a wealthy lawyer, leader in the development of Beacon Hill, and owner of a Bulfinch-designed mansion. Bishop Fenwick subsequently purchased a parcel from Mason's oldest son, William Powell Mason, in 1841. It is for South Boston landowner William Tudor, the force

behind the Boston Athenaeum's Monthly Anthology and resident of Bulfinch's Tontine Crescent, that Tudor Street, which forms the southwest boundary of the Cemetery, is named.

With the purchase of Bishop Cheverus and Bishop Fenwick, the city block between Dorchester and F Streets, 6th and Tudor Streets on the North side of Dorchester Heights underwent a dramatic change of use. What was originally the speculative real estate property of certain Boston Brahmins was now extensively used as the first Catholic burying ground. Starting with Father Matignon in 1819, the Chapel and Cemetery contain graves of numerous eminent Boston priests while many of the City's Irish immigrants of the early 19th century lie peacefully in the Cemetery.

At first the Catholic population of Boston grew slowly, starting with about 100 Catholics at the time of Father Matignon's arrival in 1792, to only about 1500 in 1816. Up until 1818, Catholics had been buried in such scattered cemeteries as the Granary, Copps Hill, and the Central burying Ground on Boston Common. Irish immigration increased in the 1820's; unfortunately, many of these new immigrants were to die in the three asiatic cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854, and in the Ship Fever of 1846. Burials in the Saint Augustine Cemetery greatly increased during this period as Bishop Fenwick forbade long processions to the Bunker Hill Cemetery in Charlestown. Then came the great Potato Famines of Ireland in the 1840's and thousands of Irish immigrants began to arrive in Boston. Many of the gravestones in the Saint Augustine Cemetery, bear such Irish names as Meehan, Brogue, Bulger, Brady, Burke, and Flanagan. These are the immigrants who came to Boston in crowded sailing ships from the Irish counties of Limerick, Sligo, Wicklow, Donegal, Kerry, Kildare, Tipperary and Waterford. These markers

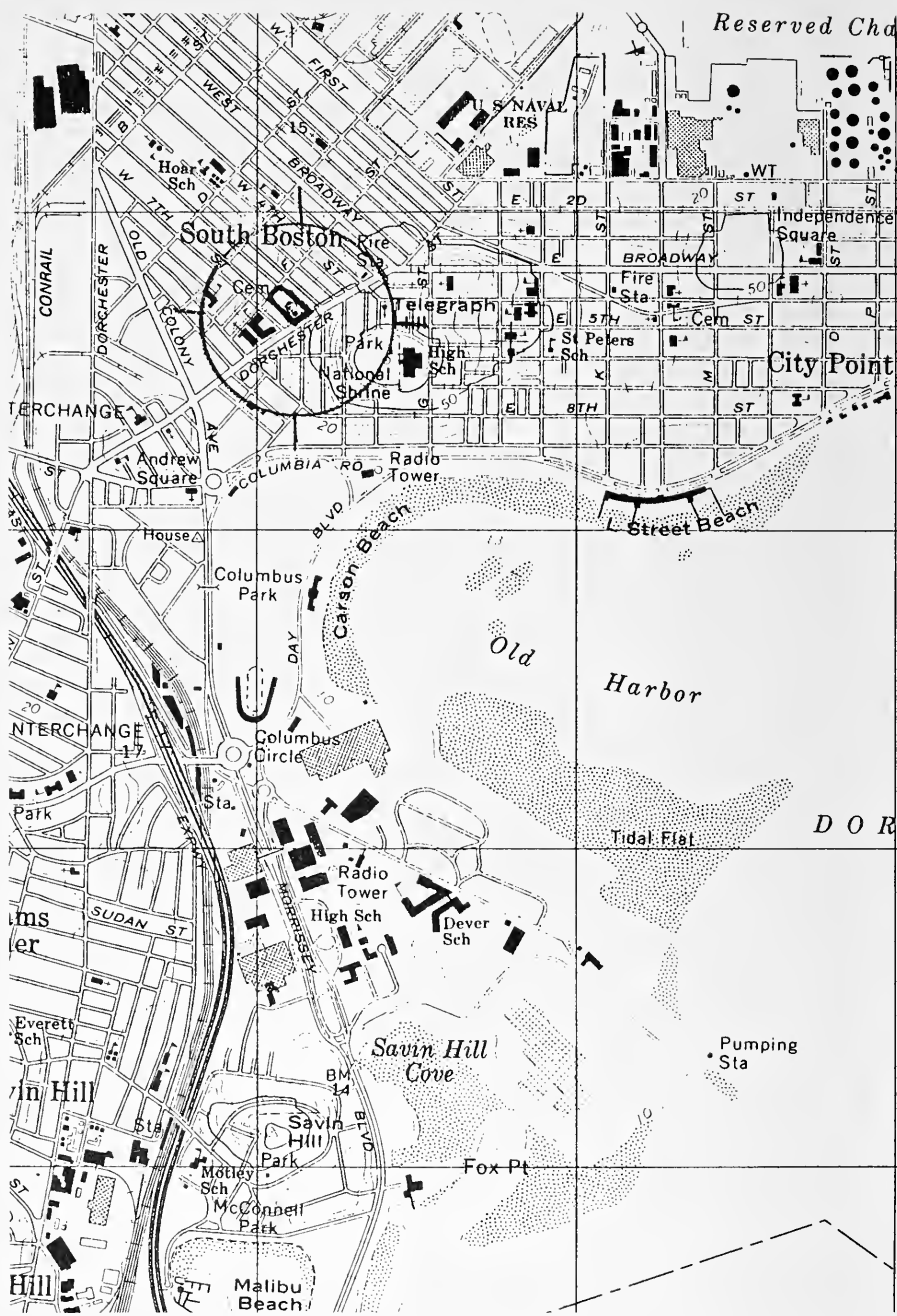
record an incapsulated version of the history of the Irish in Boston for by the end of the nineteenth century, South Boston had become the most overwhelmingly Catholic and Irish part of Boston.

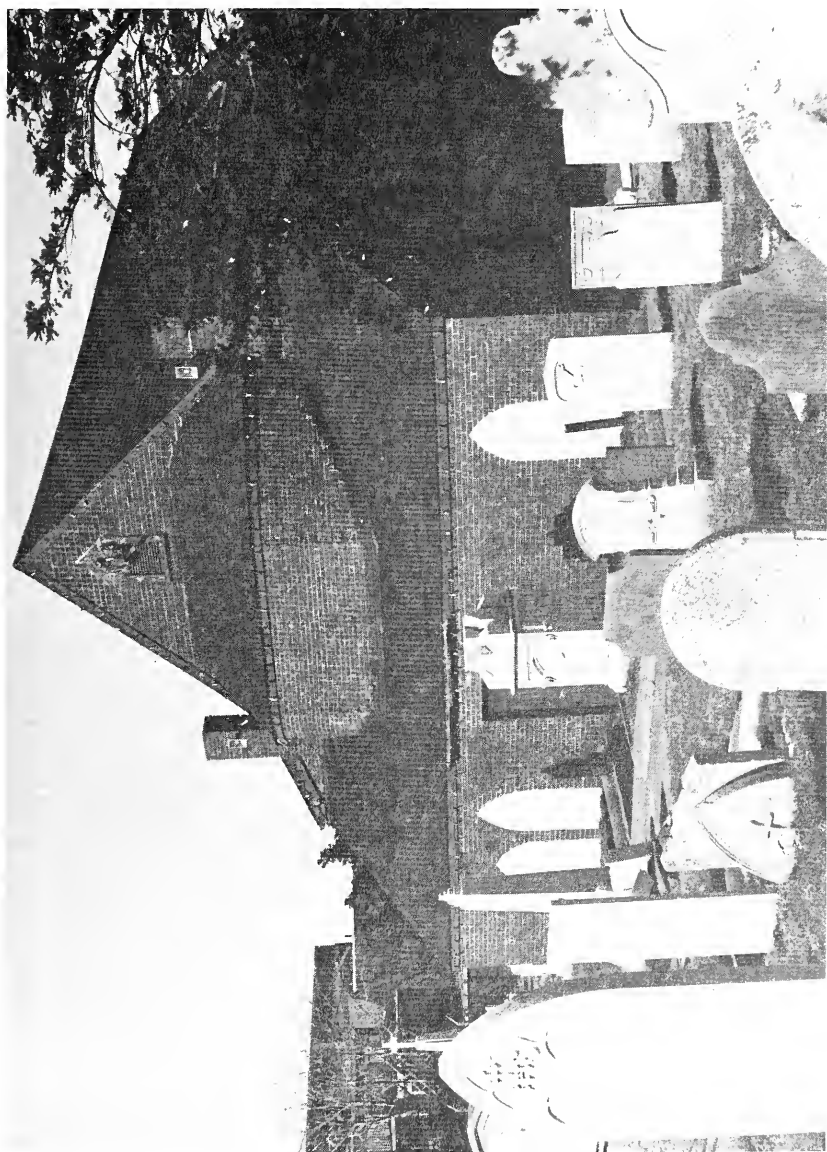
There are many persons of interest buried both inside the Saint Augustine Chapel and in the Saint Augustine Cemetery. Opposite the gravestone of Father Matignon on the gospel side (left) of the altar is the large gravestone of the Rt. Reverend Monsignor Denis O'Callaghan (1841-1913), the last priest to be buried within the Chapel. Invested as a Monsignor in 1901, Reverend O'Callaghan, the much-loved pastor of the Church of Saint Augustine from 1868 to 1913 was the man responsible for repairing the Saint Augustine's Chapel and re-opening it as a regular place of worship from 1868 to 1871. Twenty-three other priests born in widely separated areas of the United States lie buried in the red brick vaulted floor, all influential in promoting the growth of Catholicism in Boston. Sister Saint Henry, an Ursuline nun, was buried beneath the chapel floor in an unknown location in 1834, her funeral attended by five thousand mourners.

The four headstones which are built into the exterior walls of the Saint Augustine Chapel are still intact today. The rectangular stone on the right of the "So-West Elevation" is that of Mrs. Celeste Robin Delogny (died 1824) who was noted for her many charitable acts. The headstones of three distinguished Catholic priests appear on the "So-East Elevation." To the left is Reverend John Mahoney (died 1839), curate of the Church of the Holy Cross and priest of the Saint Augustine Chapel from 1833 to 1836 followed by the stone of Reverend Patrick Byrne (died 1844), ordained in 1820 and the first pastor of Old Saint Mary's Church in Charlestown. The stone on the right is that of Reverend James McGuire (died 1850), a native of the county of Cavan, Ireland.

Among other notable persons buried in the Saint Augustine Cemetery are Reverend Thomas Lynch, the first pastor of Saint Patrick's Church on Northampton Street and from 1833 to 1836 the resident priest at the Saint Augustine Chapel. The Reverend Thomas J. O'Flaherty (died 1846) monument stands just outside the Chapel door, honoring the learned Salem priest, physician and editor of The Pilot who held a famous religious controversy with Reverend Lyman Beecher in 1831. The talented journalist-businessman and founder of The Pilot, Patrick Donahoe (died 1901), also lies in the Cemetery, Robert Wagner (died 1823-25), nephew of John Wagner in whose tomb Father Matignon was temporarily interred, and one of the principal donors to the Church of the Holy Cross is buried in the Saint Augustine Cemetery along with Thomas Murray the first sexton of the Saint Augustine Chapel and close friend of Father Matignon and Bishop Cheverus. Two additional interesting figures are Jack Barry (died 1890), color sergeant for the 9th Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers, Civil War veteran and the first Irish policeman and Reverend D. S. A. Mahoney (1850-1911), founder of the Working Boy's home in Chicago. Also buried in the Cemetery are the parents of both the third Bishop of Boston, John Bernard Fitzpatrick, and the fourth Bishop of Boston, John Joseph Williams.

In summary, the Saint Augustine Chapel and Cemetery are noted as the earliest surviving resources of the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Massachusetts. They gain further significance in their association with the founders of the Catholic Church in New England, Father Francis Matignon and Bishop John Lefebvre Cheverus as well as with the growth and development of the Irish neighborhood of South Boston. The Chapel is of added importance as a representative building type and the oldest surviving Gothic Revival church in Massachusetts.





Southeast View of Chapel



Chancel, transept (crossing), and portion of nave, from balcony.



Nave; view toward balcony and narthex.



Cemetery and southeast (apse) and northeast elevations of chapel. Date: 1934. Historic American Building Survey: 61078-13- Boston 1-1. Arthur Haskell, photographer.

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